

Parent Education Program Models in Child Welfare: Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Parent education is the cornerstone of virtually every caseplan for families involved in the child welfare system. The question that often arises, however, is: Are these services really helpful in improving family outcomes?

As issues of program effectiveness gain prominence, child welfare agencies are shifting toward evidence-based models. This case study looks at two such models being implemented in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

Both models are centralized, with a program coordinator to administer the program. Santa Clara's model is community-based and utilizes primarily two evidence-based curricula: *Family Wellness and Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP)*. Four family resource centers provide the hub for service delivery, in a friendly, neighborhood-based atmosphere.

San Mateo County is in the process of implementing a new evidence-based parent education model, utilizing the *Strengthening Families* curriculum. San Mateo is following a community service model and developing a partnership with Canada College to this effect. This partnership would enable both entities to maximize resources and minimize costs while improving the quality of services to families.

Implications and Recommendations

A centralized, evidence-based model for parent education would be beneficial to Contra Costa County as it would help address some of the inherent challenges of the current system by providing greater control over program structure, evaluation, and service quality.

Recommendations include the development of a committee to further explore this issue and make recommendations for system improvement. Areas for consideration include:

- review of existing practice to determine specific areas of improvement;
- development of a centralized model customized to local needs;
- selection of evidence-based curricula, based on the specific needs of families served by Children and Family Services (CFS); and
- development of program funding, including exploring partnerships with other stakeholders, to maximize resources and minimize costs.

The Santa Clara and San Mateo programs provide excellent examples to help in this task and act as a source of innovative ideas for future program development.

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Background

When families enter the child welfare system, a case plan is developed to assist parents in addressing the issues that led to their involvement. Although caseplans vary depending on family needs, one of the fundamental pieces of virtually every caseplan is parent education. Child welfare agencies generally provide a variety of parent education services designed to assist parents in this area. The questions that often arise, however, are: How effective are these services in improving parenting skills and capacity? Are they really helpful in reducing the risk of child maltreatment?

As questions of program effectiveness become more prevalent, some child welfare agencies are moving toward implementation of evidence-based and best practice parent education models that have proven to be effective in providing positive outcomes for families, including those involved in the child welfare system. This case study takes a look at two such models in two counties: Santa Clara and San Mateo.

Santa Clara's model is community-based and utilizes a network of four Family Resource Centers as the hub for service delivery. The Family Resource Centers (FRCs) were created by Santa Clara's Social Services Agency (SSA) as part of its efforts to improve service quality and outcomes for families involved in the child welfare system. The FRCs provide a comprehensive array of integrated services in a supportive, family-friendly environment. They have a rich history of grassroots community involvement and strive to provide services that are relevant and culturally appropriate for the communities they serve. There are currently three neighborhood-based FRCs located in San Jose and one in Gilroy.

San Mateo County's Human Services Agency (HSA) is currently in the process of implementing a new evidence-based parent education model as part of its Child Welfare System Improvement efforts and consistent with the agency's goal to move toward evidence-based, best practice programs. San Mateo utilized the Peer Quality Case Review (PQCR) as a vehicle to assess existing parent education practice and develop recommendations for system improvement. Following these recommendations, San Mateo conducted a research study on various evidence-based parent education programs to determine the best fit to meet the specific needs of the families served by San Mateo's HSA.

Santa Clara's Program Model

Santa Clara's model is centralized, with a program coordinator responsible for processing all the referrals submitted by social workers county-wide. The coordinator prepares the schedule of classes every six months, processes referrals, and sends enrollment confirmation and reminder notices to the parents and the social workers before classes start. The class schedule is maintained online.

CURRICULUM AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Santa Clara's SSA contracts with four community-based agencies, selected through the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process, to provide the bulk of its parent education classes in both English and Spanish. Services in Asian languages are provided by SSA staff as no agencies responded to the RFQ in this area. County approved interpreters are provided for other languages, as needed. Consistent with best practice principles, Santa Clara's model includes a

parent orientation to provide information and address parent anxiety and questions about the child welfare process.

Santa Clara requires all the parenting courses to adhere to Welfare and Institutions Code (WIC) 16507.7 requirements for family maintenance and family reunification programs. WIC requirements are tied to state funding and include instructor training in child abuse prevention, pre- and post-testing, parent progress assessments, and provision of feedback to the welfare department on parent participation. There are also required topics including child development, self esteem, anger and stress, and communication. Santa Clara's model includes additional topics designed to meet locally identified needs of parents.

Santa Clara utilizes two evidence-based curricula for the majority of the classes offered: *Family Wellness* and *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP)*. The *Family Wellness* curriculum focuses on promoting healthy relationships and meets court requirements for domestic violence. *STEP* consists of three separate components covering early childhood, latency age, and adolescence. *STEP* uses study groups to help parents learn how to relate to their children and utilize effective methods of discipline. Some areas of the *STEP* curriculum utilized in Santa Clara have been modified over time to meet local needs. The modified curriculum is more eclectic and incorporates components and activities that have been tested and worked for specific groups locally. For example, classes for parents of teens have an increased focus on sexuality and relationships. It also includes issues of substance abuse by youth. Additionally, Santa Clara utilizes the *Love and Logic* curriculum and the *Parenting without Violence* curriculum for some of its courses.

Santa Clara offers a broad array of general and specialized classes designed to meet the diverse needs of families including:

- Basic level (30 hours) and advanced level (20 Hours) classes. The advanced level is interactive and gives parents the opportunity to apply the skills they learned;
- Co-parenting classes for divorced, separated or non-cohabitating parents;
- Specialized courses for domestic violence and substance abuse;
- Positive fathering skills classes (Feedback from facilitators and parents indicates that fathers seem to get more from these classes than from mixed groups);
- Positive parenting classes for families with GLBT issues (Gay, Lesbian Bisexual, Transgender parents or parents with GLBT children);
- Medically fragile child parenting courses taught by a nurse;
- Parenting children with challenging behaviors; and
- Positive parenting classes for young parents.

As mentioned above, the majority of the classes are conducted at the Family Resource Centers in a friendly, neighborhood-based atmosphere. Some classes are provided onsite at contract agencies. Although child attendance is not required for all the classes, parents are encouraged to bring the children. Childcare is provided on site by contracted child supervision workers. Meals are also provided for the participants.

EVALUATION

There are several components to the program's evaluation. Parents complete a survey at the end of the class. Class facilitators conduct pre- and post-tests and complete a client assessment at the end of the class in order to document the parent's progress. The test scores show that the large majority of parents benefit from the program.

San Mateo's Program Model

San Mateo is implementing a parent education program which follows a community partnership model, consistent with best practice principles of service delivery. To this end, negotiations to develop a partnership with Canada College are currently underway. This partnership would enable both entities to maximize resources and minimize costs while improving the quality of services to families. Under the proposed partnership, the HSA would be responsible

for purchasing the curriculum, arranging instructor training, and providing food and childcare; Canada College would review the curriculum regularly to provide cutting-edge instruction and provide ongoing training to new instructors. The HSA and Canada College would share social work instructors and early childhood education instructors to co-teach the classes. Also being explored is the provision of a hub coordinator and regional coordinators to provide administrative support for the program.

CURRICULUM AND SERVICE DELIVERY

San Mateo's HSA sponsored a research study, conducted by a UC Berkeley intern in conjunction with a Parent Education Committee, to assist with the selection of its new curriculum. The study evaluated various evidence-based programs and made recommendations based on each program's capacity to address the complex issues specific to the families served by San Mateo's Children & Family Services. Program cost was factored into the ranking of programs with similar curriculum designs.

San Mateo selected the *Strengthening Families Program (SFP)* as the best fit to meet local needs. A nationally accredited program, SFP has been replicated with ethnically diverse populations and has been widely utilized with universal as well as child welfare populations. The program is designed to increase resilience and reduce behavioral, academic, and social risk factors for children, ages 3-16 years. It also focuses on the family as a whole and on increasing protective capacity by improving relationships and parenting skills.

The SFP curriculum is interactive with a parent-child component at the beginning followed by parallel tracks for parents and children. The curriculum meets court requirements and consists of 14 two-hour sessions. As part of best practice efforts, San Mateo's model will include a parent orientation to provide information about the child welfare process, reduce parent anxiety, and improve engagement. Classes will be offered in English and Spanish with interpretation services for other languages, as needed.

San Mateo's proposed service delivery model would be centralized, with a hub coordinator, ideally at Canada College, who would process all referrals received from social workers. The hub coordinator would distribute the referrals to the regional coordinators who would assist with enrollment and send notifications to parents and social workers. A staff person from HSA would be assigned to coordinate the program internally, resolve issues or problems that may come up, and serve as liaison between HSA and Canada College. The model would have an evaluation component through Planning and Evaluation at HSA.

The new model would also enable the HSA to significantly expand services to families. Currently, parent education classes are open only to CFS families and are offered at two locations with a capacity of three classes at a time. Under the proposed partnership, HSA could offer additional classes at community sites through Canada College. This would greatly improve service delivery by alleviating transportation issues, providing a friendlier community environment, and making the classes available to all families.

Funding

Santa Clara utilizes \$167,000 of state Family Preservation dollars to fund contracts for parent education services with four community-based organizations. Case-carrying, Voluntary Family Maintenance Social Workers provide some of the classes as part of their work. The Program Coordinator is a child welfare staff position. Child care costs are also paid through state Family Preservation funds.

The estimated cost for implementation of San Mateo's Strengthening Families program is fairly low for the initial purchase and training on the curriculum, approximately \$3,600 for 35 staff. The bulk of the program cost would be for program staffing. HSA utilizes social work staff as instructors on a voluntary basis. Instructors receive overtime pay. Sharing instructors with Canada College would greatly assist with staffing costs. Food and child care costs are primarily paid by general funds from the county.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

- **Program Development and Funding Constraints:** Funding cuts have had a significant impact on various areas of Santa Clara’s Parent Education program, including:
 - *Class availability:* The number of classes offered has been reduced and services are no longer open to parents outside of child welfare services;
 - *Limited funding for transportation:* Classes are available in San Jose, Santa Clara and Gilroy. Residents of other areas may need to arrange for their transportation if there are no vouchers available or get referrals to find a local class that meets requirements; and
 - *Program evaluation:* There are no staff currently available for data collection and analysis.
- **Program Coordination:** Having a central person coordinating the program has helped streamline the process and provide for more continuity in both counties.
- **Program Champions:** San Mateo found the assistance of program “champions” invaluable in engaging other staff in program improvement efforts and promoting program buy-in.

Implications and Recommendations

The current system for parent education services in Contra Costa County Children and Family Services (CFS) is decentralized. Social workers at each district compile resource lists and fliers for parenting classes available in the community. Parents are provided with community referrals and contact the various agencies directly to enroll in a class.

This decentralized model poses some challenges, especially with regards to evaluation of service quality and outcomes. A centralized, evidence-based model would be beneficial as it would help address some of these challenges by providing a higher degree of control over program structure and evaluation, including:

- Coordination of services, increased program consistency, and enhanced ability to affect service quality;

- Selection of evidence-based curricula that meet the specific needs of the families served by Contra Costa County CFS as well as court requirements;
- Increased control over service delivery and best practice;
- Increased control over class schedules and availability of classes to improve access to services and meet the needs of the families, including culture and language;
- Greater access to instructor feedback regarding parent attendance and progress; and
- Program monitoring and evaluation to determine effectiveness of services in achieving outcomes and to assist in planning and improvement efforts.

Although more costly to implement than the current system, this model is consistent with CFS’ efforts to move toward outcomes-based, best practice models and could help enhance service quality and outcomes for families. CFS could further explore this issue by developing a committee to look at the current system and make recommendations for improvement.

Since the current system is entirely community-based, the committee should include community stakeholders to help inform the process. Ideally, the committee should involve parent and/or youth partners to include the consumer’s perspective. Key tasks for the committee to explore include:

- Review of existing practice to determine specific areas for improvement, such as service coordination and evaluation.
- Development of a centralized model. This process should include an evaluation of various service delivery options to determine the best approach. Efforts should be made to build on the current infrastructure to avoid fragmentation and duplication of services. Taking this into account, a community-based approach would probably provide the best fit. Additionally, some implementation costs could be offset by developing creative partnerships with community groups already involved in parent education, in-

cluding sharing of coordination, child care, and food costs.

- Curriculum selection. This should include research on the characteristics and needs of families served by CFS to identify the most appropriate curricula. There should be a review of curricula currently being utilized and their relevance to the client's needs, based on the research. Some agencies are already utilizing evidence-based curricula that may be appropriate for CFS families with children of specific age groups. The committee should also explore the pros and cons of utilizing more than one curriculum.
- Assessment of program costs and funding. This should include staffing, program coordination, evaluation, purchase of curriculum and training, space, childcare, food and other associated costs. As suggested above, funding strategies should consider the development of partnerships with existing service providers as well as funders (e.g., First Five) to maximize resources and minimize costs.
- Compilation of findings and development of recommendations based on the relevance and cost-effectiveness of the various options explored.

The Santa Clara and San Mateo programs can both be useful resources to assist in the above process. They provide excellent examples of evidence-based, best practice models to help inform practice and can be an excellent source of innovative ideas for future program development.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the following professionals from Santa Clara and San Mateo who made this case study possible:

Mary Grimm and her staff at the Gilroy FRC, Rosa Bens and Lynette Harrison at Santa Clara SSA, and Helen McLain at San Mateo HSA for sharing their expertise and providing key information and documents for this case study. Their help has been invaluable.

Frank Motta and Greta Helms of Santa Clara SSA and Linda Holman and John Joy of San Mateo HSA for facilitating my internship and providing me with the context and the overall picture of their organizations.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to my agency's management team for providing me with this opportunity and especially to my Division Manager, Deborah Moss, for her continued support during my participation in this program.

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